

PROMISE

February 23, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

--Luke 13:34 (RSV)

Scripture
Luke 13:31-35

One of the great moments in life happens when one has the privilege of standing outside a hospital nursery and looking at the babies. At one time or another most of us have done it: stood on tip toe to peek into the crib of the new child of a friend, or a relative. Some of us recall the days when that's as close as a father got. Pastors have the privilege of doing it a lot; sharing the joy of parents which always includes looking through the glass at the babies. It's one of the great moments in life: because what you're looking at through the glass is the future. Everyone knows it, senses it intuitively even without the benefit of a sign which could read, accurately: "Here is the future!" I'm certain I'll get into trouble for saying this, but when you're depressed and can't see much hope, go look through the glass.

The Judeo/Christian story begins with that kind of experience. One of the unique aspects of our story is that it really doesn't begin at the beginning. Oh, on the first page of the Bible it says, "In the beginning, God created..." But the oldest part of the stories, the Biblical scholars tell us, are bits and fragments of a saga about an old man and old woman, nomads, wanderers, childless. Abraham and Sarah are their names, and their story is the oldest - and the fundamental religious tradition for us. It comes from the Bronze Age, the very edge of recorded history. It begins when God - who in these stories doesn't even have a name yet - calls old Abraham outside his tent one night - and says "look up: count the stars: they are your babies. You have a future!"

Our story is different throughout. Its climax comes centuries later in the life of a man who reaches back into time and recovers that most ancient tradition, and teaches that God is most like a life giving parent, who takes his children by the hand and leads them into the future.

The hero of the story is not one who makes it big in any way, but one who gives life away to make his point about God's parental love and walking confidently into the future - even when that future looks hopeless, as his surely did. You can tell how different our story is by comparing it with other stories.

An archeological exhibit opened this week in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago. Back in one corner, modestly

displayed, is one of the most important figures in the history of religion, indeed in the history of the world: Baal, God of the Canaanites. The artifacts on display are from the ancient land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham, the land conquered by Israel, the land fought over ever since. The Canaanites were the people who were living there when the tribes of Israel invaded and settled in. Canaanite civilization, customs, religion, therefore, had an enormous influence of Judaic culture and by extension, Christian culture.

Their god sits in the Oriental Institute, an exquisite, tiny, gold leaf figure, seated on a thorne, with a crown and an emblem held in his left hand, and one remaining earring. Baal was the god who fought back the sea and brought order out of chaos, the god of rain and sun and fertility. Baal was an attractive, awesome nature God and the religion of Baal is the background against which Hebrew religion developed.

For a student of theology and history it was a special experience to stand in front of the modest gold statue and reflect on the power it had thousands of years ago: to recall that one of the ways Hebrew religion defined itself was negatively, as not Baalism. It was intriguing to contemplate the power to shape the lives and behavior and values and hopes and dreams of people, this little gold figure exerted. And just at that wonderfully reflective moment the woman standing beside me looked at me and said, "What in the world did they see in that pathetic little fellow?" Little did she know I was in the process of composing the introduction to this Sunday's sermon, and I certainly didn't help her because all I could think of to say was: "I don't know. What do you suppose they saw in him?" She didn't know either.

What the ancient Canaanites saw in Baal of course is what all human beings seek and need - an answer to the mysteries they can't understand, a system of meaning and order for daily life, a source of values. Canaanites got from Baal what human beings have received from their religion, their "isms," their systems of organizing and structuring life, from the Marxism which orders, or organizes and gives meaning to the Marxist revolutionary, to the materialism that order the life of the upwardly mobile American.

The old Bible stories define who God is by setting out very clearly that God is not Baal. Yahweh is creator - but more than creator. Yahweh is powerful, awesome, mysterious but more. The story is radically different, from the beginning. God tells Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, to pick up and move. God promises them, in their old age, a family and a land. Both promises are unlikely and outlandish. After all what are the long-term prospects for a childless old couple living in a tent? And so, after the initial promise is given, Abraham and Sarah, still childless and homeless, wonder a bit about the authenticity of the promise, indeed about the existence of the God. It is at this juncture that God invites Abraham to step outside his tent and look up into the sky and count the stars. Now the normal human reaction to that exercise is something like religious reverence: fear before the God of creation, terror in the presence of the Lord of this vastness, or at least a degree of appropriate awe. Even the Psalmist felt that: "When I look at the moon, stars, what is

man that thou art mindful?" That's not what happens here, however. No - what Abraham and Sarah receive again, is not primal terror, but a repeated promise of a family, heirs, babies - a future. At this fundamental level, encased in stories so old and fragile they almost crumble in our hands, we learn that God is surprisingly different: that God doesn't have to be persuaded to be attentive and kind: Abraham isn't outside doing a rain dance, or sacrificing an animal. God comes to Abraham. We learn, early on, that God is a God of promise: that there is a future and God will be in it and calls his people forward in hope. Our religion begins here when somehow, against all the odds, living in barrenness, hopelessness, Abraham and Sarah believe. That belief, - that trust - this old story shouts - is what religion is. Abraham and Sarah are people of God - this old story declares - not because they obey all the rules or believe proper dogma, or belong to the right group but because they trust God to make good the promise. They believe in the future, and not only believe it, they pack up their belongings and walk hopefully into it. That's a very different idea of what religion is. It's why there is a gold leaf Baal in the museum, but no Yahweh. God, the stories affirm - is out in the future. Our story is different. Move ahead now, 1,500 years or so. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Friends warn him that his life is in danger. Herod is looking for him. He responds that people have always treated God's messengers like that. The reader expects Jesus to say that God is sick and tired of that ingratitude: that God will abandon this strategy and find a new way to accomplish his goals. That's how Baal - or any of the gods of pagan religion would deal with human intransigence. That's how we would do it. Luther pondered God's great patience with the human race and said that if he were the Lord God he would smash the world to bits. And it is precisely here that Jesus expressed one of the most poignant and revolutionary images of God in all of history - God as infinitely patient and loving parent: God as mother hen gathering her chicks and nurturing them for their life in the future. That is what God wants, Jesus said: people who know the love of their creator and who live hopefully into the future.

The God who takes Abraham and Sarah by the hand and shows them the stars and leads them into the future is still at it, Jesus said. God's point of reference to the world is not as Potentate or even King, so much as it is parent: father and mother.

The ancient Hebrews knew that a lot depends on how you define God and that the most important issue in life is theological. They seem fanatical, as we read about their unyielding prophets battling Baal and all idols. They believed that the most important issue in life is: Who will you trust? Who is your God? Who orders, gives value and meaning and hope to your life? I would submit to you that they were never more correct. It may appear that we are captives of a long-dead past when we tell these obscure old stories, but the truth of the matter is, the issue is as relevant as today's news. The question of God, your relationship to the God you chose to trust - is the most important question in your life.

The basic issue is idolatry. Who orders your life? What is the source of your values? Who do you trust for the future? In his monumental work Does God Exist?, professor Hans Kung suggests that the first and in

many ways most important demand on the believer is to say "no" to all other gods. To believe in God but trust something else for your meaning, values and future is to be a pragmatic atheist. "One-god faith" Kung wrote, "dethrones the divine world powers in favor of the one-true God." All the gods before whom modern people bow, "the great God Mammon, the great God Sex, the great God Power, the great God Science, the great God Nation, the great God Party. The one-god faith is utterly opposed to any quasi-religion. It throws down all false gods." [p. 619]

It is the most important issue in life. Who do you trust for the future?

The pantheon of contemporary deities - modern Baals, if you will, includes power, technology, money.

We are in the process of spending every available dollar and many more that are not available (borrowing from those babies as it were) to purchase the military power we hope will save us. We look to that power and the technology that accompanies it, not only to protect - but to provide ultimate security. The national trauma of the Challenger tragedy, I believe, was that it exposed the mortality, the finiteness of our salvation scheme.

We look for "systems" to save us. Anne Tyler's wonderful new novel, Accidental Tourist, tells the story of a man whose life falls apart when he loses both his son and wife. Macon looks to systems to save him. Ordinarily an orderly man, now alone, he systematizes everything, eliminates all waste and frivolity. He lives and sleeps in non-wrinkle clothes, fashions a body bag instead of wasting time making his bed, washes his clothes by walking on them while he showers. His life is neat, systematic and without meaning until someone loves him and will not be persuaded to stop loving him. "Systems are not saving," this wise and witty author is saying.

We live in a society that proposes that what is trustworthy is cash, goods, securities. The advertisements for sleek sports cars not only point to fine craftsmanship, they promise meaning for one's life, to drive one is an ultimate experience. One insurance company, unapologetically appeals to religious sensitivities. People in the commercial have a close brush with death, something like a resurrection and now, chastened, wiser - buy more insurance! To an astonishing degree we have bought into a theological system which provides order, values, a cause for which to live, and a hope for the future. It is called materialism. To believe in God is to loosen your grip on the "isms" in which you are investing for your future. It is to acknowledge the religious significance of those "isms." It is to trust God with your future. It is to live into the future with hopefulness. And that is a radical commitment.

The evidence, the reasons for the commitment are not always easily at hand. My guess is that Abraham and Sarah had a difficult time explaining to their neighbors and family why, at their age, they were picking up and moving, making a cradle and knitting booties. My guess is that the friends

of Jesus were appalled when in the face of Herod's threat, he started talking about a God who wants to gather even the Herods of this world into a nest and mother them a little bit, instead of arming them at least for protection.

Our task is to live in the tension between the promise and the reality of life at 8:30 Monday morning. That reality can be pretty barren. We've heard the promise. We know the stories. We want to trust God for our salvation. We want to build our values, and receive meaning and future hope from our faith in God. But the barrenness is there. At some point the issue is confronted in every life.

Some must live with illness, with the certainty of continuing debilitation. Some must live even now with the certainty that the condition is terminal. Some must live with the numbing certainty that the pain will be there in the morning, and the next morning, and the next...

Some must live with addiction, with the burning physical need and then the relief and the guilt and the destruction. Some must carry that lonely burden into what looks like a future without possibility.

Some must decide the difficult matter of life in relationship: to be together or apart: to separate because there is no life left, or to stay together with the lifelessness and hope for the best.

Some must, for the sake of family, and sanity and personal health, decide how to live the rest of life: to continue risking it all for a promotion or a raise, or to re-evaluate and make tough decisions which forever alter the possibilities.

At some point each of us is deciding a basically theological question: who will I serve? Who or what will I trust with my future?

And to each of us, out of these crusty, fragile old stories comes an invitation to trust God. The promise isn't a rose garden. Abraham and Sarah didn't come close to seeing all those babies and the friends of Jesus stood by helplessly as their Lord joined the long line of martyrs Jerusalem had killed. The promise isn't that everything will be healed and restored and made instantly whole, that the pain will not be there, or the burning need for a drink, or the desperate loneliness in the middle of the night, or the regret and guilt and remorse because you decided to miss dinner and work another hour, or eat dinner with your family and miss work.

The promise is a God who takes us by the hand and leads us into the future. The promise is that God and the future may be trusted and that we can let go of the past. The promise is a God whose love for us is personal and tender and strong and parental. "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Jesus said.

It doesn't take a linguistic expert to point out how strongly feminine this image of God is. Jesus had no language or gender problems with God as

mother. The point is that the God of the promise loves us as deeply and powerfully as one human being can love another. There is no stronger metaphor for that than maternal love: the primal, urgent and compelling care a mother has for her children.

If the most important question you must answer is theological: who your God is, who you will trust, the most amazing suggestion is that there is a God who cares about you as a parent cares for a child.

The saving good news is that there is a God whose love is not ended even by the crucifixion of his son: a God of infinite patience who keeps loving through all of life: who wants to love and nurture and give growth and strength and hope - just as a mother wants that for her children.

God wants to love you. God wants you to know how deeply you are loved. God wants you to know there is nothing you can do to stop that love. God wants you to let go of whatever binds you to the past and to live for the future.

God wants you to remember that when you look up into a night sky full of stars. God wants you to know it when you fight your battles and when the future looks overwhelming, and when you feel, above all, that there is nowhere to turn and no one who cares. God wants you to recall a story about a mother hen and a promise and a love that will never let you go. Amen.